ALERT

News from the UFMCC
on AIDS Legislation, Education, Research and Treatment.

February 1994

A Loving Tribute to a Beloved Pastor

{Editor's Note: This letter, written to Rev. Steve Pieters by Deacon Bobby Smith of MCC Washington, DC, describes the grace experienced by that church upon the death of their pastor, Rev. Larry Uhrig, from AIDS on December 28, 1993.}

Rev. Steve Pieters and Rev. Larry Uhrig on Nov. 27, 1993 at MCC Washington, DC. Photo taken by Bobby Smith.

By the time you receive this letter, I am certain that you will have received many reports about Larry's funeral. Even so, I want to - need to - share some of my thoughts with you regarding this remarkable event in the life of MCC-DC.

The epiphany about which I had talked with him a few weeks earlier, came for Larry at last around 4 a.m. on December 28, as he lay in his beloved Jim's arms in his own home. At the end, I am told, Larry took a few deep breaths, cast off his mortal cloak and gently ascended to glory, peace, and knowing.

In ways that are difficult to capture in mere words, but that I know you will intuitively understand, the days since Larry died have been resplendent with grace, blessing, beauty and even joy. For the rest of the days that are allotted to me, I shall be endlessly grateful for having had the privilege to participate in the extraordinary spiritual event that saying a proper goodbye to Larry turned out to be.

Above and beyond everything else, I am thankful that on Monday night, just a few hours before his passing, I had one last opportunity to speak with Larry. Our conversation was very brief because I could tell that he was struggling for breath. Even so, I was able to tell him once more that I loved him.

I am thankful too that my restless spirit that night caused me to call you. Once more in an hour of personal need, you were there for me. As always, your words of wisdom, of knowing, and of love comforted and encouraged me. Less than four hours after you and I talked, my telephone rang. I knew it could only be one thing. I heard a voice say, "Bobby, it's Jim," and before he could say another word I simply said, "He's gone." I immediately dressed and drove over to Larry's house.

Ford Singletary, Rev. Candace Shultis, Jim and I were the only people at the house that

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Earthquake, Fire, and Death: As Grief Accumulates, What Do We Do?

By Rev. Steve Pieters

Over the past month, we in the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches have experienced an inordinate amount of loss: the complications of HIV disease have claimed the lives of Rev. Larry Uhrig, Rev. Dan Mahoney, Student Clergy Doug Bull and Byron Floyd, Board of Pensions member Paul Sheldon, and Bob Elliott, the spouse of Rev. Lee Carlton. In addition, we have grieved with Rev. Elder Nancy Wilson, Rev. Elder Freda Smith, and Rev. Elder Hong Tan, as they have laid to rest Nancy's father, Freda's mother, and Hong's neice. And Miss Ida Salmon, a much-beloved member of MCC Washington and the Fellowship, also died. This undoubtedly is just the "tip of the iceberg," since so many in our Fellowship and beyond die without any sort of national or international recognition.

The same day that Rev. Larry Uhrig died, Michael Callen died. Michael was the best-known longterm survivor of AIDS, the author of "*Surviving AIDS*," and founder and/or leader of many HIV activist groups and organizations. He was a beacon of hope for thousands of people. He was one of only two people with AIDS whom I know who have survived AIDS longer than I. With his death, I step closer to the head of the line, and it's not a line I want to be leading.

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Earthquake, Fire, and Death:...

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On top of all these deaths, Quad Cities MCC in Rock Island, Illinois was gutted by fire. And we in Los Angeles have experienced the horrors of a devastating earthquake. Rev. Elder Jeri Ann Harvey and her spouse, Jane Kuder, have lost virtually everything they own. The Mother Church, MCC Los Angeles, has experienced the apparent loss of our church building to the earthquake. "This is heartbreaking," says Rev. Elder Nancy Wilson, our pastor. "The congregation has been renovating this property for seven years. All that work is gone in an instant. The church school, the feeding programs, AIDS programs, will all have to find temporary shelter. We can be thankful, however, that no lives were lost."

We are thankful that the earthquake did not happen a mere 10 hours earlier, during a worship service. We are very much aware that the church is not the building, but the people. Nevertheless, it is still a tremendous loss, and it is still an occasion of grief. Some people are trying to avoid the grief by falling back on what we have to be grateful for. It is quite understandable that at this point, while we are still shell-shocked and still shaking from aftershocks, we are in some ways avoiding the pain of the loss. I know I must resist the temptation simply to stand in the ruins like Jeannette McDonald and sing and sing and sing. We are buoying our spirits for the work that lies ahead. But part of that work is the work of grief.

How do we handle all this accumulated grief? I remain firmly convinced that God is with us in the midst of all this tragedy. The evidence of my life is that God gives us everything we need to face and handle anything that life may throw at us. And one of the things that God has given us to handle loss of many kinds is the grief process. As I have heard all around the Fellowship, "The only way out is through."

It is not faithless to grieve. It is not faithless to question God about all the suffering we see around us. The Psalms of Lament, the Book of Job, the writings of Paul, and Jesus himself question God in the face of suffering. When Lazarus died, the Gospel of John records that "Jesus wept." Jesus grieved first, and then went and raised Lazarus from the dead.

And so we must grieve first. Anyone who has entered the grieving process with an open heart knows that grief is extremely painful. It is natural to want to avoid it. But when we finally are able to experience that pain, when we allow ourselves to fully enter the process of grief, we begin to experience healing. We can experience the presence of God grieving with us. Sometimes I believe that it is only when we allow our hearts to shatter in grief, that we can fully appreciate our connection to the pain of other human beings, and only then can we truly experience the resurrecting power of God.

When we experience these compounded losses, we have our faith to get us through. Our faith works! And sometimes it takes work to feel that faith in the face of tragedy.

When the earth was roaring and my house was violently shaking, hurling objects at me off walls and shelves, it would have been easy to think "Gee, God is really angry at me." Indeed, many of us in Los Angeles have been questioning God's role in all this.

However, just as God did not send HIV as a punishment for homosexuals, drug addicts, or anyone else, I do not believe that God sent this earthquake or these huge numbers of losses among our people as some sort of condemning message to UFMCC, or anyone else.

God is with us as we struggle to live with HIV/AIDS, fires and earthquakes. God is demonstrating amazing grace in the face of tragedy. God is giving us everything we need to face these times.

We are a people of the Resurrection. We believe in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. God is not defeated by death or destruction.

The Mother Church, MCC Los Angeles, the morning of the earthquake, January 17, 1994.

Some people choose to get angry at God and blame God for all these losses. We in UFMCC choose to believe that we are the Body of Christ, living with earthquakes and fires and AIDS, but ALIVE! And experiencing grief over our losses is part of being fully alive.

So when confronted with these multiple losses, let us grieve, rage, and carry on, with faith that God is grieving with us. May we continue to see the grace of God which surrounds us even as we mourn the losses of lives, church buildings, and homes. When I spoke with Rev. Elder Jeri Ann Harvey and Jane Kuder after the earthquake, although they were obviously grieving, I was thrilled that their sense of humor was unshaken. This is truly amazing grace!

We have no guarantee that death and destruction will avoid us from now on, but we have the guarantees of our faith in Jesus Christ, and that is sufficient for us to grieve our losses with faith. ▼

ALERT

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A Loving Tribute...

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morning. Together we shared the communal shock of the moment we had each long known was coming. As there was no reason to rush, we did not call the funeral home immediately. Instead, Jim, Ford, Candace and I spent quite a little while just being with Larry.

As we just kind of gazed at Larry and floated adrift on our own thoughts, Ford had a sudden humerous insight that was oddly appropriate. He looked at Larry and said, "Let the record show that the Reverend Uhrig passed on to Glory with his mouth open." Somehow that little bit of levity in that moment was OK.

I didn't leave Larry's side until the people from the funeral home arrived around 5:30 a.m. to take him away. Candace and I helped place Larry into a body bag. It was a hard thing to do, but she and I had done it for saints before and we could not do less for Larry. As they took him away, the first flakes of what would become a snowstorm began to fall on Washington.

Ford and I spent much of the rest of Tuesday fielding telephone calls for Jim as the word of Larry's death rapidly began to spread. In the afternoon, Jim and I drove over to the church to take care of some business and already volunteers were working the telephones to inform the congregation of the news and to begin preparations for the funeral.

In the hours immediately after Larry's passing and on through the service on Saturday, an army of members of the congregation began to mobilize to attend to the thousand details of planning Larry's funeral. But of course, Larry had not only left fairly detailed written instructions as to what he wanted at his funeral, he had in recent months had conversations with the Board of Directors and many of us on Staff to let us know his wishes.

Late on Tuesday evening, Jim and I drove in the swirling snow to the Pentagon City Mall to shop for slippers for Larry at his viewing. We went first to Nordstrom's, which was Larry's favorite store. They didn't have the slippers we wanted in the size we needed. Off we went to the other end of the mall to Macy's. We found a pair of wine-colored velvet slippers that were satisfactory and made our way home through the gathering storm.

When I stopped by the church on Friday morning to see how things were going, I was delighted to see so many volunteers hard at work. About a dozen or so lesbians were out on the property shoveling snow from the sidewalks and parking area and spreading salt to ensure the safety and convenience of the visitors we expected at the viewing that night. Inside, teams of people were mopping floors and cleaning up the sanctuary, fellowship hall and other spaces in the building.

Larry had always insisted that the true sin of Sodom was inhospitality to strangers and we were, as a congregation, NOT going to be guilty of that sin.

At Jim's request, I was there on late Friday afternoon to assist the undertaker when Larry's remains were brought to the church.

Larry was dressed in the same alb and stole (the Quilt Stole that Jim made) that he wore when he preached at the Interfaith AIDS Service at the National Cathedral in October of 1992. Several members of the diaconate took up positions at each end of the casket to greet, comfort, and thank the several hundreds of visitors who attended the viewing.

The whole evening was full of dignity and solemn beauty.

On Saturday morning we gave Larry a gorgeous funeral. The music of the assembled musicians and combined choirs soared and filled the glittering space of the sanctuary and the fellowship hall with a celestial grandeur. Each of the participants in the nearly two hour long service conducted his and herself with dignity and grace.

His funeral service was everything that Larry could have wanted. Larry's family and his flock were there for him as were friends of the congregation and relative strangers. The church was literally packed. From the time the first notes of the prelude were struck to the moment when the stirring last notes of the "Ode to Joy" echoed off the great glass walls, Larry's funeral was executed with elegance, reverence, warmth, love, and an irrepressible joy.

In the hours immediately prior to Larry's death, you assured me that I need not be afraid and that God was in all of the events that were going on that night. Intellectually I knew that, but I needed the emotional support that your kind words gave to me. By the time that we concluded our Sunday morning worship services yesterday morning, I was aware of the fact that all of us at MCC-DC had participated as a family of faith in something sublime as we bade farewell to Larry.

Everything about the week, from Larry's peaceful departure from this life to the reverent majesty of his funeral service was, in its own way and in its own context, perfect.

The ways that the congregation cooperated to assure that everything that needed to be done, was done, and done exceedingly well was deeply gratifying to me, to Larry's family and to all the other people who knew and loved Larry. A great deal of very special bonding took place among the congregation as we gathered at our glistening spiritual homestead to pay homage to our fallen leader. Larry's leaving us became a time of spiritual reunion among the diverse members of his flock. It was a time as well for us to rededicate ourselves to his empowering and sustaining vision for gay men and lesbian women everywhere. Tears and laughter abounded as together we recalled our favorite Larry stories.

You were right, Steve: God's sustaining grace, mercy and love were evident everywhere throughout the momentous events of last week. I have a hundred vignettes of moments throughout the week that are forever impressed in my heart. I will cherish those memories always.

As the weeks and months of the new year unfold before us, the congregation of MCC-DC will find itself confronted with new challenges and new opportunities. It will be a little bit scary at first, but because Larry's vision for his people was built upon The Rock, it will endure and we will abide.

I find that I am emerging from the ordeal of the last week physically weary and emotionally drained, and yet I sense that there is a renewed stirring in my spirit. I do not know what exactly is happening, but am certain that something unexpected and very good will come of it all and will be revealed to me in God's good time.

In the short term, I need to find a little time and space in the rush of events to contemplate the wonder of the amazing events that have taken place in the life of our congregation. In the longer term, I need to make myself ready for the next thing that God is preparing for me on my so far continuing journey of faith.

There was a moment on Friday night in the sanctuary when I stole a private moment with (Deacon) Leon Hampton and reminded him that he was the one who got me to MCC-DC eight years ago. I told Leon that his act of kindness in getting me there changed my life, and as we stood there near Larry's casket, I thanked him.

In every event during the last week, love reigned. Love shone through the tears and on the beaming faces of Larry's flock as we commended him into God's keeping. Gestures of tenderness and sweetness and love abounded among the people to whom for so many years Larry preached the good news of Christ's love for ALL people.

The glow from the wondrous events of the past week will illuminate my life and warm my heart for all the rest of my days.

My love and good wishes are with you, Steve, now as always. Bobby. ▼

Photo Opportunity

This photo was not available when we went to press with the last issue, detailing Rev. Steve Pieters' breakfast at the White House. In the photo, left to right, are Rev. Steve Pieters, a White House Butler, President Bill Clinton, Rev. Ed Dobson, Pernessa Seele, a White House Aide, Rev. Bill McGill, Rev. Michael Pozar, and Vice-President Al Gore.

Medical News

(Reprinted with permission from AIDS Treatment News, Issue #190, January 7, 1994)

Trials of Topical Treatment for Acyclovir-Resistant Herpes in Canada and U.S. and CMV Retinitis in U.K. and U.S.

HPMPC, an experimental drug being developed for CMV by Gilead Sciences, is also very active against herpes simplex, including herpes simplex which has become resistant to acyclovir. Systemic use is limited by kidney toxicity, but this is not a problem when the drug is used topically, applied directly to herpes lesions on the skin. A new trial, at several sites in the U.S. and Canada, is testing this potential use. There have been dramatic results in the handful of patients treated so far -- for example, one lesion shrank from 50 square cm to 2 square cm in a few days, and remained culture negative 30 days after treatment.

The trial is placebo controlled and runs for five days. Volunteers are randomly assigned to receive either 1.0% HPMPC, .3%, or placebo. After two weeks, all patients will be eligible to receive the drug. To be eligible, patients must be HIV positive, have acyclovir-resistant herpes, and not currently be using ganciclovir, foscarnet, or other treatments for herpes.

The trial will be at sites in Baltimore, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles (2 sites), New York City, San Francisco (2 sites), Seattle, and Vancouver.

HPMPC is more active against CMV than either ganciclovir or foscarnet; early human trials have shown good results in clearing CMV from urine and semen. Unfortunately, HPMPC also causes kidney toxicity, which can be reduced by adjusting the dosage schedule, and by use of probenecid, a drug which reduces the absorption of HPMPC by the kidneys. The key question now is whether the toxicity can be controlled enough for the drug to be generally used as a treatment.

A new trial, at several sites in the U.S. and one in the U.K., will test the drug on patients who have CMV retinitis which is not immediately sight threatening. Volunteers will be randomly assigned either to immediate treatment, or to deferred treatment which will begin if CMV progression is seen. They will be examined every two weeks, then only once every two weeks.

To be eligible, volunteers must have newly diagnosed CMV retinitis, which has not yet been treated with ganciclovir or foscarnet. They will be tested for kidney function, and must not have abnormal lab values.

For information, including how to contact a site near you, call Jay Lalezari, M.D., at Mt. Zion Medical Center, (415) 476-6356. ▼

U.S. Citizens: Action Alert

On January 4, 1994, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control announced the release of several TV and radio HIV prevention commercials which are now being broadcast around the U.S. A representative of the CDC previewed the commercials for Rev. Elder Don Eastman and Rev. Steve Pieters at the UFMCC International Offices in December. Eastman and Pieters have both written several letters to the CDC, as well as to the Clinton Administration, supporting this new prevention campaign.

This campaign represents an important and long-overdue educational effort by the federal government to relay specific, accurate, scientific information about how condoms can be used to save lives. The "radical right" has already started an aggressive firestorm of reaction to Congress to get a lot of pressure to kill the program when they reconvene. It is essential that the religious community speak out on this issue. For those of us who have experienced the devastation of AIDS on a daily basis, we must keep this campaign that tells the truth to the American public, alive.

A sample letter to support the campaign:

Dear Congressperson:

We are encouraged by the recent release of the HIV/AIDS Prevention Marketing Program by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. We, along with numerous AIDS organizations, have been concerned for the last ten years that our government was not aggressive enough in its previous HIV/AIDS prevention marketing campaign. We support this new effort to promote a realistic and aggressive public health message that will help reduce the spread of the AIDS epidemic.

We are well aware that the social marketing and encouragement of the use of condoms may seem to be an issue of controversy. AIDS is primarily a disease of young people, people who have to make daily decisions about their own sexuality as well as sexual behavior. While many will choose abstinence as a preventive for pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, statistics show that many more will not. The decision whether to engage in sexual activity is clearly a personal choice, influenced by that person's own sense of morality. The dissemination of scientific information to enhance the public health of the nation, however, is clearly the duty and obligation of the government in the midst of this epidemic. The withholding of this information, now known by the scientific community to save lives, would, in fact, be a greater breach of ethics within our country. It would be an immoral act of the highest nature, for the government to deny this life-saving information to those at risk.

Signed, ▼